Lenten Vespers 3/25/81
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JUDAS
Lenten Vespers
March 25, 1981

John 18:1-12

He was, at the very least, a man of great potential. Jesus saw something important in him, something that could become vital in the process of the Kingdom.

He was, apparently, a Judean, in the middle of eleven Galileans; geographically one southerner and all the rest northerners. He became the treasurer of the small group. Jesus and his entourage of twelve friends spent a portion of three years traveling... Someone had to arrange for funds and meals and places to stay. Judas was the one, performing a valuable, if unromantic function. When a woman emptied out a bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus, an act of lovely extravagance, a kind of symbolic annointing for death which he accepted at face value, it was Judas who remonstrated, with levelheaded common sense, that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor.

He was a deeply committed man: strong, effective, efficient, loyal. Most of the scholars who work with the texts and the fragmentary data of history conclude that Judas was, above all else, passionately patriotic. Some believe that he was a member of the Zealots, an underground, revolutionary, political party devoted to independence and freedom for Israel. The Zealots effectively harassed the Romans, using classic guerrilla tactics of surprise raids, murder and intrigue. Their purpose was to prepare for the day when the whole nation might rise up and drive the hated Romans into the sea.

The Zealots were watching and waiting for the Messiah. When he came, they would be ready to fight with him and die for him.

What Judas actually did is terribly familiar. He went to the officials of the Temple in Jerusalem who intended to get rid of Jesus as quickly as they could anyway, and offered to lead them to him and to identify him for the purposes of arrest. To seal the bargain the Temple authorities gave him the thirty pieces of silver. Judas played it straight. He left the table in the Upper Room - in the middle of some opaque references to betrayal, met the Temple guards and led them to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, to prevent a quick substitute by one of Jesus' friends, he identified Jesus by greeting him in the way customary for disciple and Rabbi, with a kiss.

It couldn't have been the money. The amount is not significant, I am told. Fifty dollars, perhaps. It simply doesn't make sense for a disciple of three years to sell out his master for a few dollars.

Again, the scholars believe that Judas was a disappointed and disillusioned patriot. Assume for a moment that he was a Zealot. When Jesus intentionally entered Jerusalem in the way the Messiah was supposed to arrive, and when the common people wildly welcomed him to a city filled with religious pilgrims celebrating their liberation from oppression centuries before, and when Jesus went straight to the Temple and

ejected physically the very symbols of corrupt religion and politics, Judas thought that the moment had come. The revolution was about to begin. All it needed now was for Jesus to say the word. When he didn't, when instead of the speech which set off the revolt, he withdrew to Bethany for the night, Judas knew that the moment, the moment for which he had given three years of his life, had come and gone - slipped through his fingers as quickly as water. And so in profound disappointment, perhaps rage, Judas betrayed his master. Perhaps he did so, convinced that Jesus was an imposter, a fraud, a hoax who had deluded Judas and a lot of others with his delusions of grandeur about God's Kingdom, and then betrayed them by his loss of nerve at the last moment.

That seems to me to be a distinct possibility. And it could have been even more subtle. Perhaps Judas thought that Jesus was, himself, waiting for the right moment: that Jesus was watching and waiting to see if any of his friends had the heart for real confrontation and conflict. Perhaps he was intentionally waiting for someone to set up a situation in which his hand would be forced and he would have reason to respond with strength and to mobilize the popular following which he had gathered. Perhaps - and this is the saddest and the most plausible possibility - Judas left the Upper Room, not knowing that he was the betrayer, instead thinking that he was the only one who really understood Jesus. How else to explain what must be the most forlorn sentence in the Bible: "When Judas saw that he was condemned, he repented..." Does it mean what it says: Judas didn't know? Judas didn't

intend for him to be condemned? Judas thought that he was acting with decisiveness and courage, and suddenly saw that he was responsible for Jesus' "death"? The most forlorn sequence in the Bible. "He brought back the thirty pieces of silver - saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' They said, 'What is that to us?'. And throwing down the pieces of silver in the Temple, he departed: and he went and hanged himself." (Matthew 27:3-5)

Perhaps we have made Judas into such a scoundrel because that disguises the fact that the betrayal was appallingly human and terribly familiar. Perhaps if we consign Judas to the pits of hell we will not have to confront the truth that betrayals are not always treacherous and betrayers are sometimes doing the best they know how to do, and that almost always betrayals happen when personal priorities begin to rule our behavior and we discover, to our delight, that we can rationalize whatever we want to do.

I don't know many people who have broken the promise of fidelity and betrayed a husband or wife, who intended to be treacherous. People don't often mean to hurt one another. People don't plan to betray. It happens for what seems at the time to be very legitimate reasons. Traitors who give away vital military information believe that they are doing it out of love for their own country. Always they regard their betrayal as an act of high moral courage.

The story of Judas is a description of what happens when we attempt to force Jesus Christ into the mold of our own priorities. Jesus, very simply stated, was not the kind of Christ Judas wanted. And instead of altering his own expectations, Judas destroyed Jesus by trying to force him to do something he could not do. It is a warning against that dynamic in any age. Jesus can't be enlisted to support our church, priorities, our nation, our way of doing things, our way of life. To force him is to betray him.

There is a lot to be learned from this forlorn story. But most important of all is that in his zeal for his own priorities, and his shame when he realized where it had taken him, Judas missed the one thing that could have saved his life. - the grace and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. Judas had read the scriptures but had not understood. The "new thing" the prophet promised was not a revolution, but salvation; a new dimension of love and grace acted out in history which would forever offer peace to the Judases of the world. He missed that.

Too bad he couldn't have waited until the first day of the week. Too bad he couldn't have known that crucifixion wasn't the last word. Too bad he didn't see the church begin and grow in every city of the world. Too bad Judas couldn't have lifted up his remorse, guilt, shame and self-loathing to God, seeing the cross, not so much as symbol of his own sin but of God's invitation to wholeness and life and joy. Too bad Judas couldn't have lived long enough to learn that nothing could keep God from loving him - not even the cross.

That's the dimension Judas never saw. That's a dimension we can miss too, if all we perceive in his story is a bad man doing a very bad thing. Judas was loved, too - Jesus never stopped loving him. ("Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.") could have applied to him as well. "[redacted]" ... ~~Each of us could ask that.~~ Each of us has betrayed. But the point of the ~~whole~~ exercise is not to blame and assign guilt and exact punishment. The point is good news of a love that reaches out to us in spite of all that. A love big enough to forgive and accept and, in that, to give the gift of new life.

AMEN.